

The Telegraph

What is the Zika virus and how can you avoid catching it?

Scientists believe the virus can cause birth defects such as microcephaly, which leads to an abnormally small head

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The World Health Organisation (WHO) said on Thursday that it expects 3-4 million cases of the Zika virus. WHO is set to publish a study establishing the correlation in time and place between the virus and birth defects in babies, but cannot yet outline the causation.

What is the Zika virus?

The Zika virus is a tropical disease which takes its name from the **Zika forest in Uganda**. The virus is spread via mosquitoes and is similar to dengue fever and the West Nile virus. It is generally mild and self-limiting, lasting between four and seven days - but the incubation period can last up to 12 days.

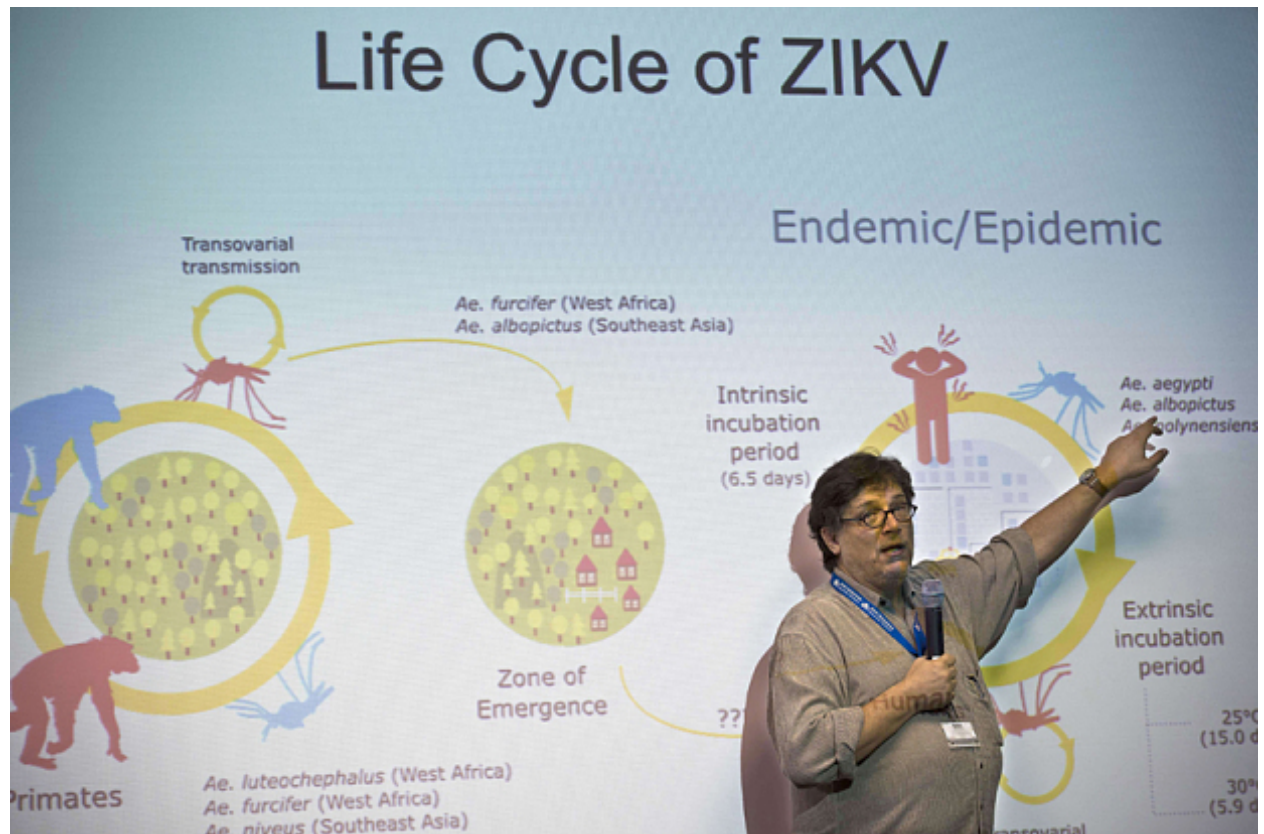
What are the symptoms?



The Zika virus is spread through mosquito bites from *Aedes aegypti*, pictured Photo: AP

The symptoms include fever, headache, conjunctivitis, rash, myalgia, and arthralgia. In rarer cases, **Zika virus sufferers** may come down with abdominal pain, diarrhoea or constipation and dizziness.

Are there any complications?



Researcher Paolo Zanotto during a press conference at the Institute of Biomedical Sciences of the Sao Paulo University

Yes, potentially. Pregnant women are urged to avoid traveling to areas where the virus is present as there is a risk **it can lead to birth defects in children.**

Another potential complication is Guillain-Barre syndrome, which is also known as Landry's Paralysis - a rapid onset of muscle weakness, caused by damage to the nervous system.

What kind of birth defects?

The most serious birth defect is microcephaly, where babies are born with abnormally small heads.

What is microcephaly?



Luiza Arruda was born with a rare condition, known as microcephaly. Luiza's mother Angelica Pereira was infected with the Zika virus, and Brazilian health authorities are convinced that Luiza's condition is related to the Zika virus
Photo: AP

Microcephaly occurs when the head fails to grow at the proper rate.
The condition is potentially deadly and can lead to severe disabilities among those who survive.

How widespread is microcephaly?

Cases of microcephaly have surged in Brazil, with more than 4,000 reported since October, while there are fears that it could soon spread to the US.

It is understood that a small number of cases were detected in Texas after tourists **returned from South America carrying the virus.**

With the virus sweeping through South America, experts have warned that hundreds of thousands could already be infected without realising it.

And on Friday it emerged that three people from the UK had been diagnosed with Zika virus.

Is there a cure?

There is currently no known cure for the Zika virus and therefore the only way to prevent the dangerous complications is to avoid contracting it in the first place.

ABOUT

Zika virus



Photo: AP

The most common symptoms of the Zika disease are fever, rash, joint pain, and conjunctivitis (red eyes), usually lasting from several days to a week, and most patients don't need hospitalisation. However the outbreak in Brazil has led to instances of Guillain-Barre syndrome and pregnant women giving birth to babies with birth defects

How it spreads

- Through mosquitoes, which mostly spread the virus during the day
- Through sexual transmission
- Mosquitoes also spread dengue and chikungunya viruses
- There is no vaccine

How to prevent it

- Avoid getting mosquito bites by using insect repellants, and wearing long-sleeved shirts and trousers
- Use air conditioning and/or a window screen to keep mosquitoes outside
- Sleep under a mosquito bed net
- Reduce the number of mosquitoes by emptying standing water from containers such as flowerpots or bucket

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention